

City without excitement.

Against a self-evident notion of 'real city life'

Kristiaan Borret

Paris is not Rome. One of Gogol's short stories, *Rome*, is about a young Roman prince who goes to study in Paris and becomes entranced by the exciting city life that goes on there. 'How he stood staring in astonishment, how impossible it was for him to collect his thoughts, when he walked through the streets with their throng of all kinds of people, their pattern of racing buses. He was struck at one moment by a café that dazzled with an unimaginable, princely splendour, and soon afterwards by the famous viaducts, where the muffled thunder of thousands of stamping footsteps, produced by a bustle of almost exclusively young people, which deafened him, and where the sparkling of the shops, indirectly illuminated by the glass ceiling, blinded him. Soon after he stopped in front of the posters that crowded in their millions in motley colours before his eyes to proclaim the 24 daily theatre performances and countless concerts.' After the ecstasy comes the sobering up: Gogol shows the young man that the dizzying vitality of Paris is merely 'a frivolous vaudeville.' Having learnt his lesson, the prince returns to his native Italy, where the rediscovery of the landscape and the ancient monuments, the museums, archives and churches in 'eternal Rome' restores a spirit of serene seriousness to him. 'There was a world of difference between this awareness of the peaceful solemnity of quiet and those nervous impressions with which he had so pointlessly filled his soul in Paris.'

Two types of urban life-style are contrasted in Gogol's heavily moralising short story. Paris is presented as the capital of modernity, where the dynamic of 19th century capitalism is constantly alive, where life is multi-faceted, active and bustling. Rome is presented as the place of restraint and stasis, where the majestic splendour of history demands an elevated life-style. Paris the ephemeral, Rome the eternal.

While in reality Paris is just as much a historical treasure chamber and it is possible to imagine Roman life as frivolous, it is still worthwhile to consider our notions of city life in the light of Gogol's version. After all, the holding up of Rome as an example of urban life would meet with little approval from most of the prevalent/striking/notable/prominent urban planners of today. In so far as urbanity is still linked to the specific spatial context of the central city and is not regarded as a condition that can also be found elsewhere in the diffuse city, the dominant discourse of urbanism nowadays is much closer to Gogol's characterisation of Paris as a city packed with modern life, though without the negative moral connotations that he associates with it.

Generally speaking, we only consider a city to be a city if it has difference, quantity and speed, all interacting to produce a cocktail of conflict. This paradigm of the modern metropolis as an overdose of stimuli was laid down in Georg Simmel's famous essay *Die Grosstadt und das Geistesleben* (1903) and the fascination it elicits has been seen countless times in modernist culture, such as in the collages of Paul Citroen or in Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Beyond the oscillation between CIAM functionalism and the successive reaction of neighbourhood renewal policy, the love of the hectic dynamism of the big city has been explicitly articulated once again with Rem Koolhaas' idea of urban congestion. At that end of the ideological spectrum of

urban planning, nervous metropolitanism is the way to measure to what extent a location displays the qualities of city life. The call to create maximal urbanism by devising 24-hour systems of programmes to guarantee around-the-clock liveliness is an obsessional product of this. But at the conservative end of the spectrum too the conviction remains unshaken that the city must not be dull anywhere.

Although the movement for the reconstruction of the traditional European city, which has been very influential in Brussels from the Arau, does not envisage dazzling modernity, it still enthuses about the conviviality of the bourgeois city in which lively mixing plays an equally important role. What they have in mind is not the anonymous nervousness of Gogol's Paris, but the cosy liveliness of the pre-industrial city. However, the reconstruction movement cherishes the harmony of Gemeinschaft and thus rejects the conflict-and-congestion programme of the modern metropolis.

The assumption that "real" city life is equivalent to liveliness has also directed the criticism of the urban public space. For instance, during the neighborhood renewal projects, the problem was formulated in terms of sociability: it was regretted that the streets and squares of the city were no longer automatically a place for social contacts, but were fully determined by functional requirements. The urban society envisaged by this policy of renewal is one of small, sociable, tight-knit communities. In the 1980s criticism of the one-sidedness of building for the neighbourhood led to its replacement by more comprehensive urban renewal programmes that paid more attention to cultural and recreational facilities. To increase the vitality of the city, planners ended up in a logic that virtually profiles the city as a tourist product. By now the culture of traffic-free streets, shopping paradises and terraces which followed in the wake of urban revitalisation has reached saturation point in many cities.

The absorption of the city centre by private initiatives in the boom of city entertainment in turn becomes the pretext for a new generation of criticism. The new criticism is formulated in different, political terms and now tackles urban renewal itself. There are fears that the inner city will be nothing but an entertainment centre. After all, the conversion of the city centre into a permanent festival area by the commercial and real estate sector regularly leads to excesses and thereby endangers other aspects of ordinary city life. Commercial activities colonise the public domain of the street and square on all sides and attract all of city life to themselves, thereby draining it from other spots. At the same time vitality is often reduced to a form of diversified overabundance and spectacle that is in line with a logic of consumption. In this way the emphasis on the liveliness of the urban public space comes to follow in the footsteps of further commercialisation and 'festivalisation' of the city centre. One of the dangers of this reductive logic of vitality is that a space in the city is only called a 'public space' if it is an important centre of the urban festivities, in other words if it attracts a crowd.

Meeting people, sociability and liveliness should not be the only framework in which to assess the urban public space. The discussion of public space is concentrated today not so much on the question of whether it is too boring, but of its public-political character.

Representation of a community, fundamental accessibility, freedom of speech, absence of exclusion and possibility of appropriation are qualities that are

inherent in the special status of public space. The obsession with liveliness sometimes overshadows an ordinary but extremely fundamental criterium such as public property when we talk about the public character of the city.

So with the notion of city life connotations of fullness, quantity, mixture, diversity often slip into our minds unobserved. The notion of city life - and indirectly the notion of urban public space - is connected in an almost self-evident way with the idea that a city is not attractive if it is not lively. Of course, this is valid to a large extent. But once it becomes reduced to the assumption that what is not lively is not urban either, it degenerates into a fallacy.

That is why we could classify the Mont des Arts at a glance as a place where something is wrong. The Mont des Arts is not so lively because there are no cafés or shops in sight, the surrounding programmes lead a somewhat sleepy or hidden existence, and the interaction between the different publics and user groups is limited. But does that mean that the Mont des Arts is not an urban space? May we never consider a site that is central but quiet, extensive and monotonous as urban? Is it less authentic? Is it not exaggerated to expect 'liveliness' at every place and on every scale in the city? Does a public space have to attract a lot of people and events before it can be considered urban? Why does it sound inadequate to call a place public because it houses public institutions that preserve and study the public heritage? Is an urban space problematic if it is primarily used by passers-by? Is urban life necessarily lively, or can it also be serious and restrained? Can we include in our notion of urbanity environs that are regarded as unattractive because they are not very spectacular? Can the Mont des Arts be urban without the need for excitement? Can we not admit a bit of Rome into our Parisian longings about Brussels?